

MINN. UNIV. DULUTH

THESES. PLAN B... CONSIDERATIONS OF IMPERMANENCE  
IN SCULPTURE

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## PREFACE

Before I began work in impermanent sculpture, I worked with cast cement forms. In an effort to make my sculptures lighter and more manageable, and to increase the size of the pieces, I added styrofoam as a core material. One sculpture was made by building the whole from individually cast horizontal layers. It was assembled as a composite form by stacking the cast layers, one on top of the other.

In the next series of sculptural works, I used styrofoam blocks cut to standard shapes (i.e., five inches square and an inch thick). These blocks were stacked on each other and set in a horizontal position by wedging them into place between two fixed points (hence the name "span"). The horizontal styrofoam spans were positioned in ramps, hallways, and passageways throughout the university community area at U.M.D. during the fall and winter quarters of 1974-75.

By using impermanent materials to construct sculptures on a larger scale, I simultaneously became interested in the areas/sites into which these sculptures could be placed. I continued to use impermanent, light-weight materials, such as tapes, strings, cords, plastic tarpaulins and styrofoam, as starting points in dealing with large indoor spaces within the university area. I have experimented in an effort to expand my viewpoints of impermanent sculpture towards more total sculptural situations, and beyond merely the use of transitory materials.

This paper is concerned with several aspects of impermanent sculpture. The points in question are generalized here. Questions are followed by discussions of specific areas of concern. Material is presented which seems to support my premises. Artists have been included for their personal viewpoints of sculptural impermanence. They do not represent a unified body of work in sculpture, nor a particular school.

In this manner a locus of impermanence in sculpture will be presented.

Within the past ten years (1965-75) there have been changes in sculptural theory and a noticeable shift of emphasis away from the importance of making discrete objects. The sculptors promoting this change remain a small group of major avant-garde artists. Part of the change in emphasis has involved a rejection of permanence as a major force in ascribing aesthetic boundaries. A further implication of the shift away from the importance of the discrete object has been the reorientation of the senses from the perception of the object to the discernment of its environment. This may be seen as a displacement of the sensory pressure from the object to the space, or site.<sup>1</sup>

As Jack Burnham has recently expressed concerning post-formalist aesthetics,

. . . once the format of the sculptured object . . . was seen as an unnecessary impediment, the idea of the environment reasonably followed. Artists such as Andre or Flavin transformed the idea of the environment into a structural extension of the premise of the work itself, [e.g., Dan Flavin has used entire gallery spaces to arrange industrial fluorescent lighting fixtures. The specific works exist at a particular location at a particular moment in time. Carl Andre has abandoned materials on the streets of New York City, where they were exposed to the direct experiences of human contacts\*] in other words, work and environment, [i.e., location, site\*] modify and inform each other.<sup>2</sup>

The space of a room itself is a structuring factor both in cubic shape and in terms of the kinds of compression different sized and proportioned rooms can effect upon the object-subject terms. That the space of the room becomes of such importance does not mean that an environmental situation is being established. The total space is hopefully altered in certain desirable ways by the presence of the object.<sup>3</sup>

For example, in 1965 Robert Morris showed, at the Green Gallery in New York City, a pyramid mounted on rollers. Morris did not entirely control the arrangement of the piece, since it was often rolled to butt against the wall. Sometimes it was free-standing. It influenced the space into which it was put by determining how the space was divided. In another piece (a grey plywood wedge) from the same show, Morris is concerned with how the eye passes over the inclined plane and in so doing how more of the room height is eliminated.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, as suggested by Robert Morris, the object, when placed among these new conditions, becomes but one of the aspects. If

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\*Bracketed insertions mine--E. B. A.

it is to function, the object must cooperate with other variables--light, space, site, and so on. This turn of events has expanded the limits of sculpture by focusing on the conditions under which certain kinds of objects are seen.

The object itself has not become less important, it has merely become less self-important. By taking its place as a term among others the object does not fade . . .<sup>5</sup>

The considerations which will be discussed here are presented as hypothetical questions.

What are the criteria for a work to be called impermanent sculpture?

The most obvious criterion is the impermanent quality of the physical material used to make a sculpture. A second criterion, not directly related to impermanent vs. permanent media, is the disposability of the object itself, i.e., the likelihood of the work being permanently disposed of once it is removed from its site. Some idea of such occurrences may be gleaned from M. Kozloff's review of the show "9 in a Warehouse."

. . . The works must be prepared for reshipment back to the studio. Instead of being dismantled, unhooked, dolled and crated, these sculptures will have to be rolled up, swept into a pile, chipped and chiseled from the corner and scraped and scrubbed from the wall. . . . We are touched by the knowledge that these works cannot even be moved without suffering a basic and perhaps irremediable shift in the way they look.<sup>6</sup>

It is the transience of the object rather than the intactness or durability of the medium that provides the major premise for the show "9 in a Warehouse."

What are my own primary concerns with impermanent sculpture?

One concern is with the selection of materials and is based upon the suitability of a medium to represent a specific concept. For example, the plastic materials used in my sculpture "4 Walls" (see Figures 1 through 4) served the conceptual intentions of the work in the following ways:

1. The transparency of the material enabled the viewer to

perceive multiple spaces at one time.

2. The four plastic walls were concerned with bringing about the infringement of spatial areas upon adjacent areas.

The primary/first concern is not exclusively applicable to impermanent sculpture. A second concern is with the choice of an ephemeral medium which is based upon an unwillingness to stress durability. For example, clear plastic tarps were used to construct "4 Walls." Such facility strengthened the concept of duration as a spiral event (installation/interval/removal). (See Figure 5 for abstract on "4 Walls.") This unwillingness can be understood as an attempt to strengthen the import of the concept--a strengthening of the intellectual ratio vis-a-vis the object. The above concern should in no way imply support of the premise that the concept or idea is more important than the visual results. "It is [both\*] the process of conception and realization with which the artist is concerned. The work of art can only be perceived after it is complete."<sup>7</sup>

A third concern is with place, i.e., site, location, space. The location selected should be suitable for presenting the concept. Carl Andre had this to say concerning spaces:

. . . My things are conceived in the world. For me, they begin in the world, and the world is full of different kinds of spaces, inside private dwelling spaces, inside museum spaces, inside large public spaces, and outside spaces of various kinds too. There is always a location in mind.<sup>8</sup>

The space in which a sculpture is placed is important also for the part it plays in the selection of an audience. Different

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\*My insertion--E. B. A. (and similarly for all such brackets)



spaces/locations supply correspondingly different audiences to whom the sculptural work is exposed. When confronting a work to make a value judgment of it, if what is to be had is no longer restricted to the specific object, then it could be found within the expanded situation. The audience and the location are part of this expanded situation.

An obvious question arises out of such an expanded situation. Of what significance is an audience?

In choosing a location (site for the emplacement of a sculpture) one has also been choosing an audience. Thus, a location may be selected for the possibility of audience involvement it may supply. Works are placed on sites to confront people, allowing them to be spectators and participants. The works infringe and impinge not only upon the locales, but also upon the people who customarily frequent the area. In this way the works are less likely to be viewed with that "take it or leave it" attitude held by object-oriented viewers, who, in a broad sense, understand art to be an object--static and final.

The works, by their sudden appearance within a space/place/location, may take the audience/spectator by surprise. Installations of my impermanent sculptures generally have taken only a few hours. An honest and often spontaneous response has resulted from people confronting the work for the first time. For example, a corner of the studio gallery was chosen for the installation of the "Dotted Line Corner" piece (see Figures 6 and 7). The specific corner was chosen because it was at the end of the longest

diagonal of the room from the gallery entrance. The corner offered the greatest distance for viewing the piece. An art student, who generally frequented the exhibits in the studio gallery, reacted to the corner piece soon after its installation. He felt visually drawn into the corner, right through the dotted-line opening. As he approached the piece from different directions, he expressed his perception of changes in the corner, within the dotted line. A viewer's perception of a space may be altered by the sudden appearance of a sculpture within his habitually frequented locale.

Works are also marked by an equally sudden removal. For example, the installation of Horizontal Spans (see Figure 8 for abstract) in the Games Room of Kirby Student Center was completed quickly one evening with little spectator awareness--the audience was to meet the work the following morning. The sculptor, as well as the spectators and participants, had no guarantee as to how long the sculptural installation would remain intact. The work, or pieces of it, was not removed until the installation had been torn down by avid users of the Games Room.

Location and audience supply important contexts for non-enduring sculptures. When a sculpture's radius of influence reaches the space it materially occupies, as for example with the work of Horizontal Spans, in which a user of the area must physically modify his movements, then the work can no longer be regarded as just an object--work, site, audience modify and inform one another.

What further aspects of impermanence are of concern--what conditions influence the viewer's experience of a temporal work?

Previously I have expressed concern with the viewer's awareness of the expanded sculptural situation. Now conditions influencing the viewer's experience will be discussed. Mel Bochner has an extreme philosophical note on the relationship between non-enduring art forms and one's experience of them.

On approaching the perceptual threshold of non-enduring art we can easily postulate an art of microseconds . . . but rarely see it. Why does art have to be any more distinct than peripheral vision? I do not mean this in the sense of now-you-see-it-now-you-don't. I am imagining an art which by taking up all the expected requirements of our basic modes of perception would, in so doing, render itself invisible.<sup>9</sup>

Bochner's hypothetical experience is surely an extreme condition of non-enduring art forms on the level of daily existence.

On the other hand, the viewer's experience may not even include the question of permanence or impermanence of objects, but of timing. A work that would last for a year, another for an hour, another for a couple of seconds, would force some new kind of awareness upon those viewing it. If one knew it would never be available again and that one would never see it again, then the appropriate time for viewing would have to be immediately.

The conditions under which a viewer looks at the sculptural situation must be considered. There are so many different conditions that standing right before a sculpture or walking around it could well be the most simple kind of experience.

You can fly over something, walk along something, drive by (in car or train). You can "disorientate" the spectator in space, integrate him, you

can make him smaller and bigger, you can force upon him space and again deprive him of it.<sup>10</sup>

The emplacement of Horizontal Spans in the entrance ramp to the sculpture studio at U.M.D. can be seen as an effort to offer the spectator various conditions under which he can experience the work. Intervals between spans offer alternative positions from which the viewer can observe and experience the work. The intervals between spans may be understood as intervals of time as well as of distance. Only by traversing the area could the participant fully experience the conditions of the work in space and time. Perhaps one could become aware of the sculptural situation as one experiences time (as a condition) spent in traversing the area.

An art form that offers alternative conditions for its observation, an art form that can cause people to engage themselves directly in the process of observation through participation, is an art form that may release the spectator from his allegiance to the perceptual status quo.<sup>11</sup>

What is documentation?

Documentation generally relates to record-keeping--the recording of events, activities, happenings, objects, and so on. In so doing, documentation openly acknowledges the part time plays. Impermanent sculptures which acknowledge time within themselves may need to be documented.

For what purposes are these records kept?

Documentation increases the possibilities of impermanent sculptures to extend themselves in time. This does not mean that documentations of the work are substitutes for the work. As R. Morris points out in an interview with Lucy Lippard,

The removal of the work itself and a purposeful replacement of its existence with a photograph has never been a working method. Insofar as I do something I want it to be experienced for what it is. It is important to me that it is there, and available (on site).<sup>12</sup>

A work may be exhibited and published through its documentation. In this form it reaches a wider audience. As a substitute for the art form, it extends itself beyond the original sculptural situation. By their duplication and dissemination, documenta become information on and a communication of the sculptural work.

What are the forms of documenta?

Documenta take the form of photography, cinematography, videotapes, audio tapes, drawings, maps and descriptive language. The latter includes statements and interviews of the artist which refer back to the work.

How can documentation be used?

Documenta extend the duration of a work. They are not substitutes for the sculptural works, but information resulting directly from them. Documenta insure the possibility of information retrieval--that information about a work will remain available to people.

How have documenta been used in my own work?

Documents were presented as extensions of my work. They were exhibited for the university community through a gallery display. I exhibited black-and-white photographs, colored slides, and written statements. They represented recent works previously installed for short periods of time.

Is there need for new vocabulary in dealing with impermanent sculpture?

The intentions of the artist are often articulated through conversations, interviews, commentary and written documenta. A large input into the meaning of impermanent sculpture comes through a verbal ideology. "The nature of language and how it is used are basic to the kinds of meanings and communications created."<sup>13</sup>

New work often requires discarding old words (old words being particularly associated with old works). New works may require new words to describe them. New definitions may have to be given to words. Terms such as "transitory," "temporary," "transient" and "ephemeral" are all understandable words that refer to a condition which is lasting, existing, securing or effective for a span of time only. Such descriptive terms are a first step in the characterization of a sculptural work. Additional vocabulary may evolve from documenta--new uses of language are found in commentary, interviews, statements, and the like.

What is the relationship of the artist to language?

There has been an explosion in the use of language to communicate concepts. In the past ten years artists have been communicating their art through use of abstracts, written proposals and daily publications. For example, the current work of Joseph Kosuth consists of categories from the thesaurus and deals with multiple aspects of an idea. Rather than present the work in the form of mounted photostats, the artist chose to purchase

spaces in newspapers and periodicals.<sup>14</sup> Artists are relying more on the meanings of words to further their aims. Recently, conceptual artists and idea artists have contributed the informational and documenta-associated idioms as the sole vehicle for expressing their concepts. Artists are doing more writing.



What possibilities does impermanence in sculpture offer to art?

Impermanence has been taken up as an element in sculptural work for over a decade within avant-garde circles of Europe and the United States. During the late sixties it emerged within the informational and documenta-associated idioms of conceptual art. A review of "Distributions," an outdoor piece constructed at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, contends that the work was distinguished by its immaterial, conceptual nature and by its extreme temporality.

The conceptual nature of the piece was deeply offensive to the beliefs of its River Falls audience, it was a direct attack on our understanding of art. The most offensive aspect was its temporal nature (within two weeks of its completion . . . it had all but disappeared).<sup>15</sup>

Le Va's piece encompassed the entire River Falls campus. On a map of the campus, he overlaid a system of concentric circles and lines radiating every ten degrees from the center. Fifteen points on the map were selected. On the campus students drove numbered stakes at each of the fifteen points, two bags of grey cement were placed at each stake, the stakes were removed at six of the fifteen points and the powdered cement was spread thinly in a circular shape on the snow.

The use of an insubstantial material, the temporalness of the work, and the incomprehensibility of the system of arrangement of the cement circles were qualities which made it a successful piece. These qualities challenged the aesthetic boundaries held by the university community.

Impermanence has incorporated itself firmly into the agency of many sculptural works. My own work "4 Walls" used clear plastic to delineate and contain a space within a space. I accepted the dismantling of the work as its physical terminal point. However, the absence of the sculpture created a void which may not have been noticed prior to the installation of the sculpture. The void became the terminal point of the work, and impermanence became an active aspect of the work.

In past art, it was a fundamental assumption that sculpture had stable boundaries, one of them being its stability in time, or durability. Perhaps, as Mel Bochner suggests, "Boundaries are only the fabrication of our desires to detect them."<sup>16</sup>

The activity of art today is less concerned with the possibility of finite solution than with the possibility of making discoveries in a diversity of media.<sup>17</sup>

Surrendering an object's permanence, challenging boundaries of stability, may be threats to one's assumptions about what art making is. Burnham writes,

The process [of making discoveries] is analogous to that of keeping a diary of thoughts, jottings and essays. The form itself often spills over into life. The work-in-progress nature of the activity seems to render art without boundaries.<sup>18</sup>

The attention given to impermanence in sculpture should be seen as an emphasis on the process of material change. It is an emphasis on art as an activity of change, of disorientation and shift, of discontinuity and mutability. Underlying this emphasis is a world view and description of reality, a physics which is no longer object-founded, but opened and keyed to se-

quences of events. It lies within an expanded context of object making to organize visually the appearance of the world.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Dennis Oppenheim, as quoted in: Don Karshan, ed., Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup>Jack Burnham, The Structure of Art, p. 135.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture," in Minimal Art (Gregory Battcock, ed.), p. 233.

<sup>4</sup>David Antin, "Art & Information, 1 Grey Paint, Robert Morris," Art News, Vol. 65 (April 1966), p. 24.

<sup>5</sup>Minimal Art, p. 234.

<sup>6</sup>Max Kozloff, "9 in a Warehouse," Art Forum VII (April 1969), p. 39.

<sup>7</sup>Sol Le Witt, as quoted in Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects, p. 55.

<sup>8</sup>Phyllis Tuchman, "An Interview with Carl Andre," Art Forum VIII (June 1970), p. 56.

<sup>9</sup>Mel Bochner, "Excerpts from Speculation [1967-1970]," Conceptual Art (Ursula Meyers, ed.), p. 56.

<sup>10</sup>Jan Dibbets, as quoted in: Germano Celant (ed.), Art Povera, p. 103.

<sup>11</sup>Terry Smith, "Event Structure Research Group in Australia," Studio International, Vol. 181, p. 34.

<sup>12</sup>Lucy Lippard, ed., Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object, p. 257.

<sup>13</sup>Allen Leepa, "Minimal Art and Primary Meanings," in Minimal Art, p. 201.

<sup>14</sup>Art Povera, p. 98.

<sup>15</sup>Larry Rosing, "Distributions--Le Va," Art News, Vol. 68 (Sept. 1969), p. 52.

<sup>16</sup>Bochner, p. 50.

<sup>17</sup>Jack Burnham, Beyond Modern Sculpture, p. 12.

<sup>18</sup>Conceptual Art and Conceptual Aspects, p. 52.

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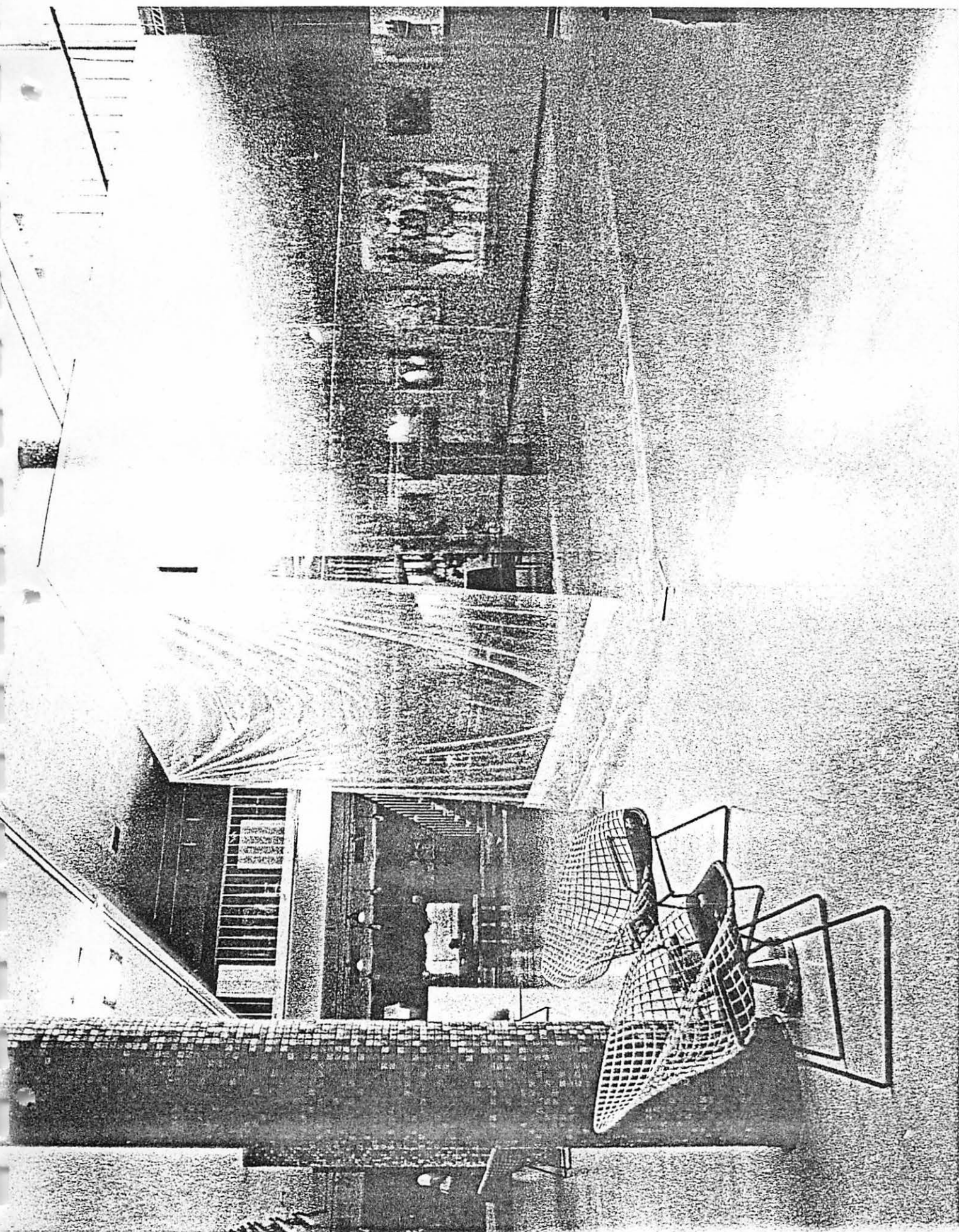


Fig. 1. "4 Walls"



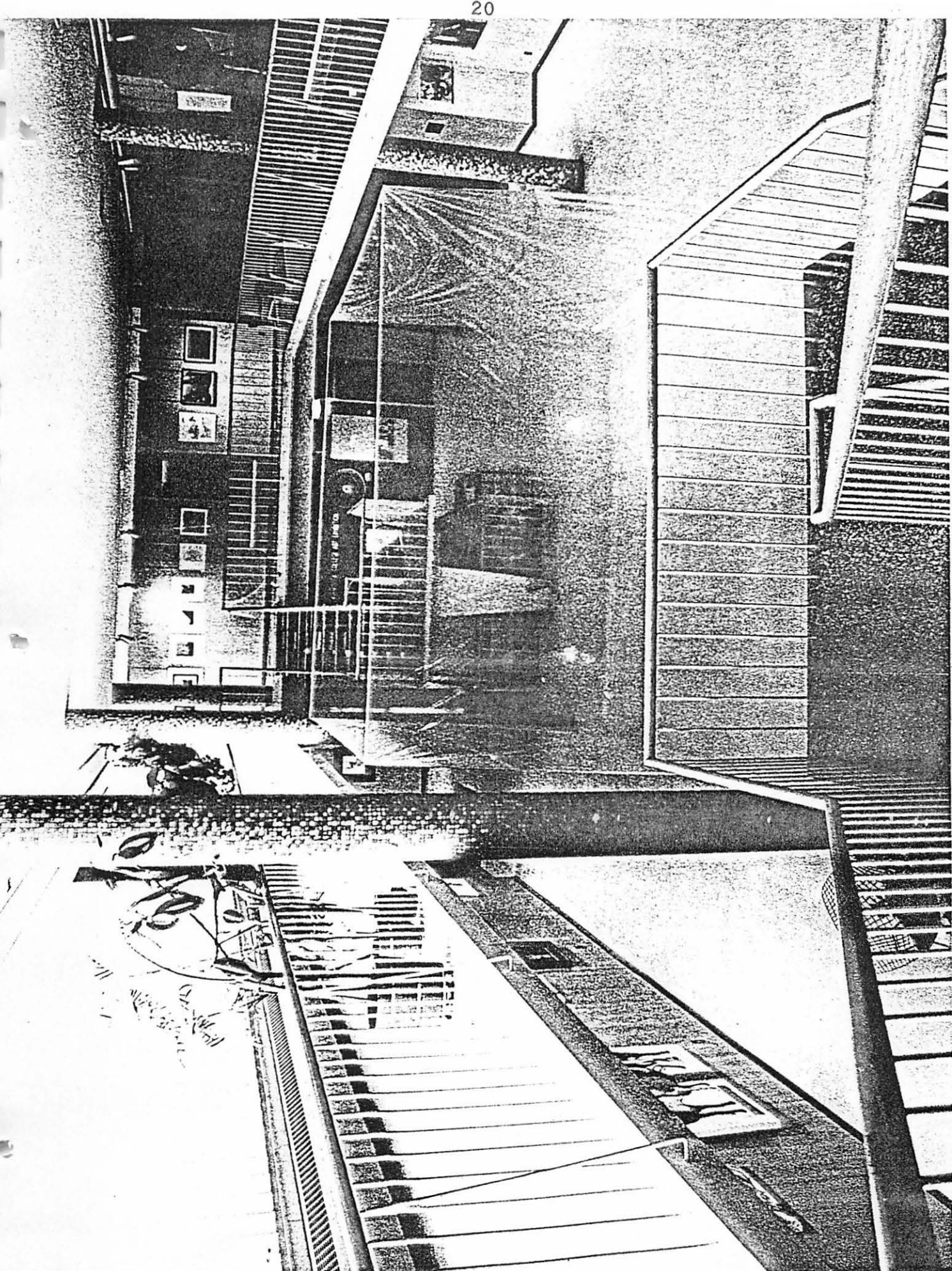


Fig. 2 "4 Walls"

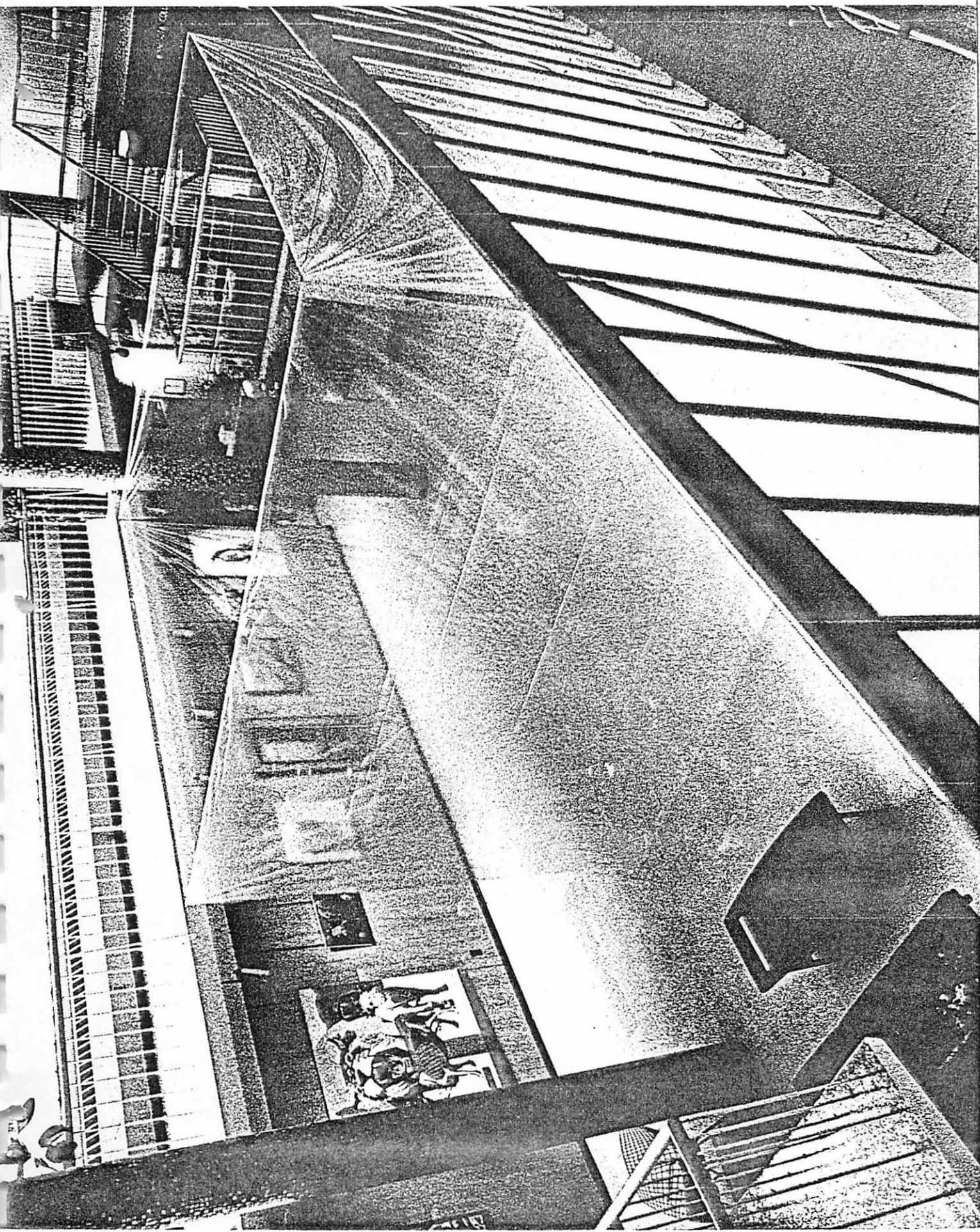


Fig. 3 "4 Walls"



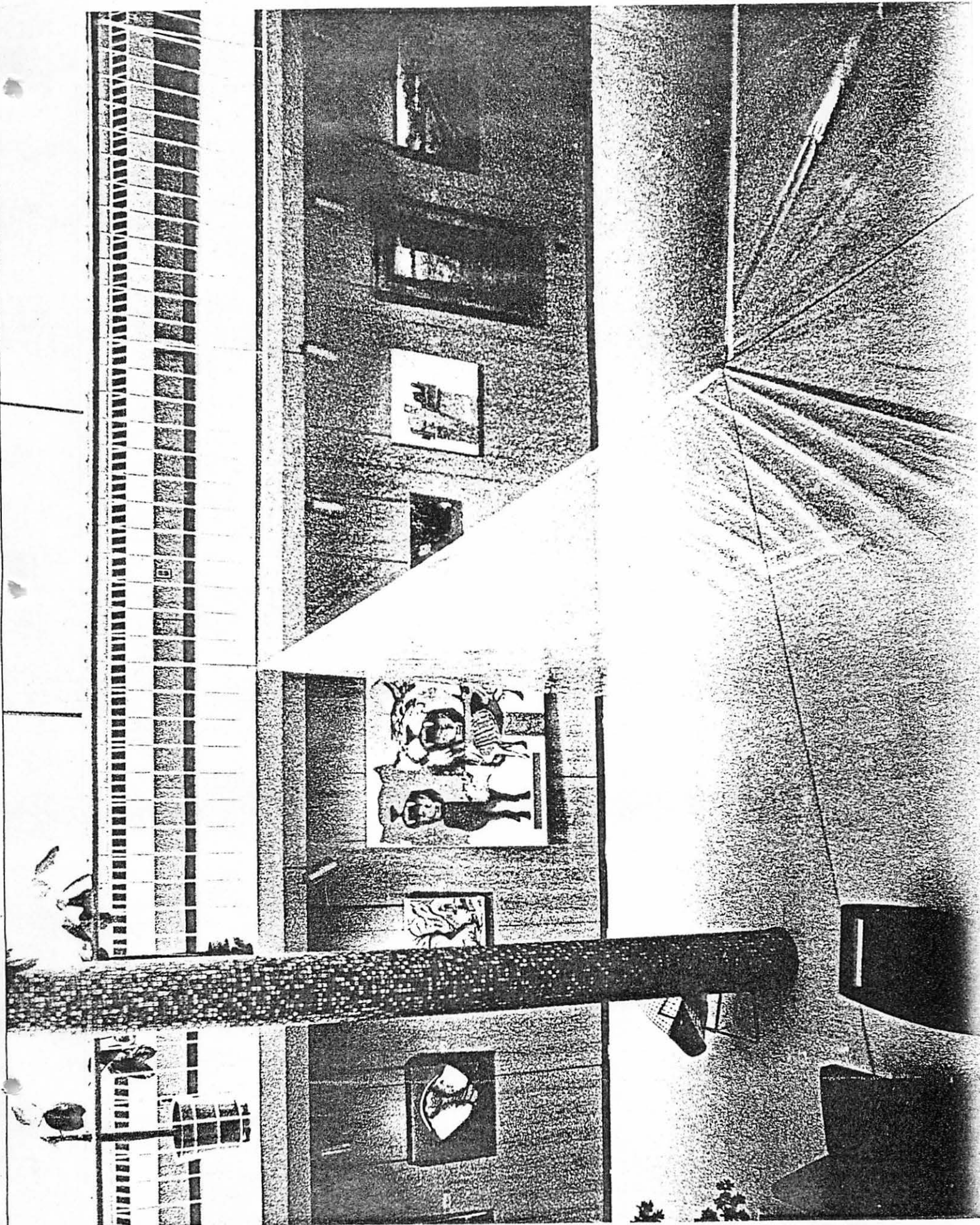


Fig. 4 "4 Walls"

A SERIES OF SCULPTURAL WORKS HAVE DEVELOPED OUT OF MY INTEREST IN LARGE, OPEN GALLERY SPACE AND GALLERY AREA DIRECTLY ADJACENT TO OR ADJOINING THAT SPACE. EACH WORK IS INTENDED TO BRING INTO QUESTION THE NATURE OF THE RELATIONSHIP OF SUCH SPACES, I.E. THE OPEN SPACE IN WHICH THE WORK IS TO BE INSCRIBED AND THE SPACE DIRECTLY ADJACENT TO THE WORK. EACH WORK IS ALSO INTENDED TO QUESTION THE VIEWER'S SENSE OF SPACE.

WHEN CONFRONTED BY THE WORK THE GENERAL VIEWER, WHO IS USUALLY FAMILIAR WITH THE UNQUESTIONED NATURE OF THE GALLERY SPACES, IS ASKED TO REAPPRAISE THE SPACIAL SITUATION. THEREFORE THE CONTEXT OF THE WORK IS FOUND IN THE ORIENTATION ITS PRESENCE MAKES ON THE VIEWER'S SENSES.

THE WORKS ARE IMPERMANENT, ORGANIZED TO BE INSTALLED AND REMOVED QUICKLY. EACH WORK IS SUITABLE ONLY FOR THE SPACE IN QUESTION. THE WORK MEANS TO CHANGE THE VIEWER'S SENSE OF A SPECIFIC GALLERY SPACE.

INSTALLATION AND REMOVAL OF THE WORK ARE SEEN AS RECIPROCAL OCCASIONS WITHIN A SPIRAL EVENT: INSTALLATION GIVES THE ALTERED GALLERY SPACE, REMOVAL HELPS TO FURTHER THE EVENT BY GENERATING ANOTHER SET OF ALTERED SPACES. THE INTERVAL BETWEEN THE TWO ALLOWS TIME FOR THE VIEWER TO BECOME ACCUSTOMED TO THE NEW SPACE RELATIONSHIPS.

I AM HOPING A NEW AWARENESS WILL RESULT WITHIN THE GALLERY BY THE SPIRAL EVENT (INSTALLATION/INTERVAL/REMOVAL) OF THE WORK. (This brings the activity of installation and removal of the work into the content of work.) THE CONTEXT OF THE WORK SECURES ITSELF AS A PRODUCT OF TIME--A DIRECT RESULT OF THE TRANSCIENCE OF THE PIECE. A POST EVENT RESULTS FROM THE ABSCENCE OF THE WORK.

Installed Tweed Museum Feb. 6 1975

Fig. 5 Abstract "4 Walls"

:

A SPACE MAY HAVE FIXED QUANTITY,  
MEASUREMENT OF CIRCUMFERENCE, LENGTH, HEIGHT, PERI-  
METER, ETC.

OUR EXPERIENCE OF IT IS MORE FLUID.

THE VIEWER CHANGES THE SHAPE CONSTANTLY BY HIS  
CHANGE IN POSITION.

A SPACE NEED NOT HAVE A FIXED QUALITY.

TO EMPTY SPACE AND SOLID FORM MAY BE ADDED THE SCREEN.  
WHEN IT CAN BE PENETRATED (VISUALLY), THE FACE OF A  
SOLID CAN BE INTERPRETED AS A SCREEN. AS ONE APPROACHES  
A SPACE, ONE CAN ALSO MOVE INTO IT; ONE CAN PENETRATE  
ITS CONTAINMENT.

Installed Studio Gallery May 7-11, 1975

Fig. 6 Abstract "Dotted Line Corner"



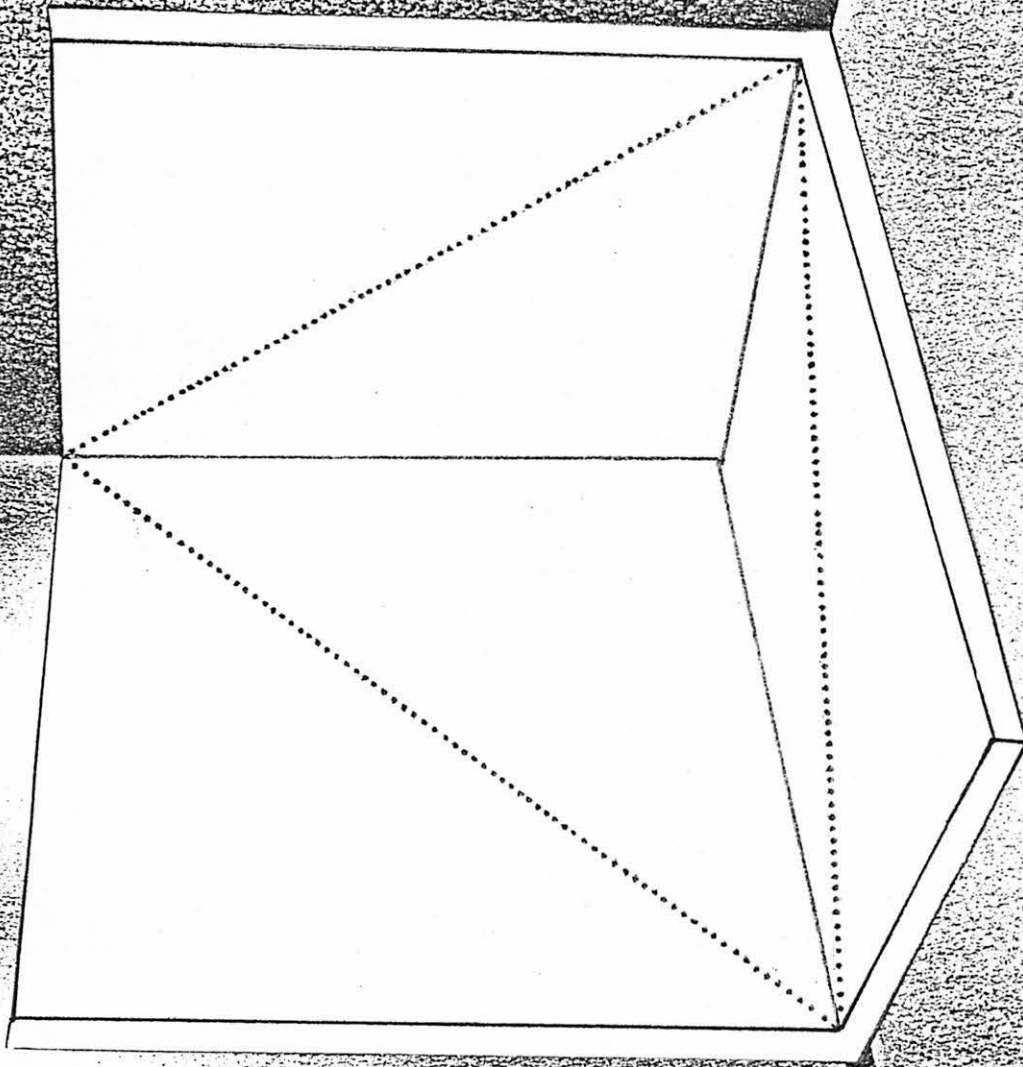


Fig. 7 "Dotted Line Corner"

## HORIZONTAL SPANS: A WORK IN PROGRESS

A SERIES OF PROJECTS HAVE DEVELOPED OUT OF MY INITIAL INTEREST IN HORIZONTAL SPANS. EACH OF THESE WORKS IN ITS OWN WAY INTERRUPTS NORMAL PEDESTRIAN ACCESS TO PASSAGEWAYS AND ENTRANCES. EACH WORK REQUIRES A PEDESTRIAN TO CHANGE HIS/HER ACCUSTOMED POSTURE, GATE, AND VISUAL ORIENTATION IN ORDER TO SUCCESSFULLY TRAVERSE THE AREA. AN ATTEMPTED PASSAGE OFFERS A KINESTHETIC EXPERIENCE.

THE SPANS ARE CONSTRUCTED OF LIGHT WEIGHT STYRO-FOAM, SUITABLE FOR TEMPORARY INSTALLATION. THEY ARE WEDGED INTO PLACE BETWEEN TWO FIXED POINTS. SUCH PRESSURE TENDS TO IMMOBILIZE THE SPANS, HOLDS THEM IN PLACE YET ALLOWS SUFFICIENT MOBILITY TO ACCURATELY ADJUST AND ARRANGE THEM.

THERE IS A FURTHER ASPECT OF THIS WORK WHICH INTERESTS ME: THE ACTIVITY OF PLACEMENT AND CHOICE OF SUITABLE AREAS FOR EMPLACEMENT OF HORIZONTAL SPANS. THE ACTIVITY OF INSTALLING THE SPANS NEED NOT BE KEPT SOLELY WITHIN THE SCULPTOR'S DOMAIN. EMPLACEMENT CAN BE OFFERED TO THE PUBLIC AS AN ACTIVITY. PRE-CUT SECTIONS OF STYRO-FOAM USED TO FORM SPANS AS WELL AS GENERAL INDICATIONS, DIRECTIONS AND NECESSARY EXPLANATIONS FOR THEIR EMPLACEMENT CAN BE MADE AVAILABLE FOR SPECTATOR USE. CHOICE OF PLACE, DURATION AND TIME OF PLACEMENT CAN BE THE DECISION OF THE INVOLVED SPECTATOR.